

What do the Dates on Food Packages and Medicines Mean?

The only foods that are required by federal law to have expiration dates are baby food, infant formula, and over-the-counter medications. No medicines should be distributed after the expiration date. The Food Bank does not distribute baby food past its expiration date. However, some products designed for babies such as juice and cookies or biscuits can be distributed past their date and are safe to eat.

Many Canned and boxed products are safe to eat long after the date on the container, and the shelf life of refrigerated and frozen foods can be extended if they are handled properly. Once a perishable item is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires – foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely, though the quality slowly deteriorates over time. Here are some code dates you may see on food packages:

“Expiration Date” (Examples: “Expires 11/15/23” or “Do not use after 11/15/23”)

- **Look for it on:** Baby food and formula, medicines, vitamins, yeast, baking powder.
- **What it means:** Do not distribute infant formula, baby food, vitamins, or medicines after the expiration date! Yeast and baking powder work less well after expiration, but are safe to eat.

“Pack Date” (Examples: “Packed on 03/01/2023” or “22:5306412” or “KL064”)

- **Look for it on:** Canned food, crackers, cookies, spices.
- **What it means:** This is the date the food was packaged. A code is often used that cannot be understood by the general public, often numbering days sequentially such that January 1 is day 001 and December 31 is day 365 (366 in leap years). Usually this food is of good quality and safe to eat for a long time past the date.

“Sell By” Date (Examples: “Sell by January 1, 2023”. Also called “Pull Date”)

- **Look for it on:** refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, eggs, lunch meat, packaged salad mixes.
- **What it means:** The store must sell these foods before the code date listed and often donates these foods when they are close to date. If the food has been handled properly it is still safe to eat and the quality is good. Food bank staff monitors this food to ensure that the quality remains good.

“Use By” or Quality Date (Examples: “Best if used by 1/1/23” or “Use before 1/1/23”)

- **Look for it on:** Crackers, cookies, cold cereals, and other dry, shelf-stable food.
- **What it means:** This date is the manufacturer's recommendation for how long the food will be at peak quality. After the quality date, the food is still safe to eat but slowly begins to lose nutrients and the quality begins to lessen.

Shelf-Stable Product

Most shelf-stable or 'dry' foods (cans, boxes, bags) remain edible for several days, months, or even years past their code date. Always examine the packaging to make sure it has not been damaged too much so that the food is no longer safe to eat.

Do Not Consume Food from Cans or Jars If:

- Leaking or stained
- Swollen can
- Rusty
- Badly dented, crimped or pinched
- Container is cracked
- Foul odor
- Safety seals are broken or missing
- Lids are loose or missing
- Foods exhibit changed color or odor – **never taste suspicious foods!**



Do Not Consume Food from Boxes If:

Inside bag:

- Is torn or leaking
- Has moldy or foreign objects inside
- Seals are ripped

Boxes without an inside bag:

- Is open or torn
- Has live or dead insects, webs, or droppings
- Is stained or wet



Tips on Storing Canned and Boxed Food:

- ✓ Store cans and boxes off the floor, either on a pallet or shelf and 18 inches away from the wall so air can circulate.
- ✓ Store canned and boxed goods in a clean, dry, and cool area (below 85°F)
- ✓ Extremely hot (over 100°F) and cold (below 30°F) temperatures can damage canned goods and shorten shelf life.
- ✓ Always rotate your stock – First in, first out! Distribute or use older products before newer ones.

Shelf-Stable Foods	Shelf Life After Code Date
Baby Food	
Cereal: dry mixes	Expiration date on package
Food in jars, cans	Expiration date on package
Formula	Expiration date on package
Juice	1 year
Canned Foods	
Beans	3 years
Fish: salmon, tuna, sardines, mackerel	3 years
Frosting, canned	10 months
High-acid foods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fruit (including applesauce, juices) • Pickles, sauerkraut • Baked beans w/ mustard/vinegar • Tomatoes, tomato-based soups & sauces 	1-2 years
Low-acid foods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gravy, soups/broths that aren't tomato-based • Pasta, stews, cream sauces • Vegetables (not tomatoes) 	2-3 years
Meat: beef, chicken, pork, turkey	2-3 years
Pie filling	3 years
Aseptically-packaged Products	
UHT Milk	1 year
Broth: beef, chicken, or vegetable	3 years
Soup	3 years
Fruits	3 years
Vegetables	3 years
Condiments, Sauces, Syrups	
Barbecue sauce (bottled)	1 year
Frosting, canned	10 months
Gravy (dry mix envelopes)	2 years
Honey	1 years – remains safe after crystallization. To us, simply immerse closed container in hot (not boiling) water until honey liquefies
James, jellies, preserves	18 months
Ketchup, cocktail, or chili sauce: jar, bottle, or packet	18 months
Mayonnaise: jar, bottle, or packet	3-6 months
Molasses	2 years

Shelf-Stable Foods (Continued)	Shelf Life After Code Date
Condiments, Sauces, Syrups (Continued)	
Mustard: jar, bottle, or packet	2 years
Olives	18-24 months
Pickles	1 year, canned 2 years, jarred – discard if inside of lid is rusty upon opening
Salad dressings: bottled	1 year
Salsa: bottled	12-18 months
Spaghetti sauce, canned	18 months
Spaghetti sauce, jarred	18 months
Syrup, chocolate	2 years
Syrup, corn	2 years
Syrup, pancake	2 years
Vinegar	2 years
Worcestershire sauce	2 years
Dry Goods	
Baking mix, pancake	9 months
Baking mixes (brownie, cake, muffin, etc.)	12-18 months
Baking powder	18 months
Baking Soda	Indefinite if kept dry
Beans, dried	1 year
Bouillon: beef or chicken	12-24 months
Bouillon: vegetable	12-24 months
Bread, commercially prepared (including rolls)	3-5 days at room temperature 3 months stored frozen
Cakes, commercially prepared	2-4 days at room temperature Several months frozen
Candy (all, including chocolate)	9 months, caramel 18 months, chocolate 36 months, hard candy
Casserole Mix	9-12 months
Cereal, cold	1 year
Cereal, hot	1 year
Cookies	4 months
Cornmeal	1 year at room temperature 2+ years frozen
Crackers	8 months Except graham crackers, 2 months
Flour, white (all purpose or cake)	1 year

Shelf-Stable Foods (Continued)	Shelf Life After Code Date
Dry Goods (Continued)	
Flour, whole wheat	6 months Keeps longer if refrigerated or frozen
Fruit, dried	6 months
Macaroni and Cheese, mix	9-12 months
Nuts, out of shell	6-12 months, bagged 12-24 months, canned
Nuts, in shell	6-12 months
Oatmeal	12 months
Oil, olive, vegetable, salad	6 months
Pasta, dry (egg noodles)	2-3 years
Pasta, dry (no egg)	2-3 years
Peanut butter	18 months
Popcorn, kernels	2 years
Popcorn, commercially popped and bagged	2-3 months
Popcorn, microwave packets	1 year
Potato chips	2 months
Potatoes, mashed, instant flakes	1 year
Pretzels	6-8 months
Pudding, prepared/shelf-stable	1 week
Rice, brown	1 year
Rice, white	2 years
Rice-based mixes	6 months
Shortening, vegetable	8-12 months
Spices	Up to 4 years, whole spices Up to 2 years, ground spices Spices lose flavor over time but remain safe to use indefinitely
Stuffing mix	9-12 months
Sugar, brown (light or dark)	18 months
Sugar, confectioners	18 months
Sugar, white	2+ years
Sugar substitute	2 years
Toaster pastries	6 months, fruit 9 months, no fruit
Tortillas	3 months, shelf or refrigerator 6 months freezer Do not use if they develop mold or harden

The following information applies only to shelf-stable beverages. Juices and milk products requiring refrigeration are covered in the next section, along with other refrigerated items.

Shelf-Stable Beverages	Shelf Life After Code Date
Cocoa mixes	36 months
Coffee creamer, liquid shelf stable	9-12 months
Coffee creamer, powdered	2 years
Coffee, ground	2 years
Coffee, instant	1-2 years
Coffee, whole bean	1 year, vacuum packed
Instant breakfast	6 months
Juice, bottle, shelf-stable	9 months
Juice, box	4-6 months
Juice, canned	18 months
Juice concentrate, shelf-stable	
Milk, evaporated	1 year
Milk, non-fat dry	1 year
Milk, shelf-stable UHT	6 months
Milk, sweetened condensed	1 year
Nutritional aid supplements (Boost, Ensure, etc.)	1 year
Rice milk, shelf-stable	6 months
Carbonated beverages (soda/seltzer water)	3 months, bottles (all)
	3 months, diet (cans)
	9 months, regular soda or seltzer (cans)
Soy milk, shelf-stable	6 months
Tea, bagged	18 months
Tea, instant	3 years
Tea, loose leaf	2 years
Water	Indefinite; store in a cool, dark place away from chemicals
Water, flavored	Indefinite; store in a cool, dark place away from chemicals

Tips on Storing Refrigerated Food:

- ✓ Keep all chilled food refrigerated at 40°F or below until distribution.
- ✓ Store eggs in their original carton.
- ✓ Leave space for air to circulate between items in the refrigerator.
- ✓ Rotate stock so that older foods are distributed first.



Dairy and Cooler Items	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Butter	2-3 months	1 year
Buttermilk	10-14 days	Freezes poorly
Cheese trays	2 weeks	Do not freeze
Cheese, cottage	10-15 days	Freezes poorly
Cheese, cream	2 weeks	Freezes poorly
Cheese, hard	6 months	6-8 months
Cheese, soft	1-2 weeks	6 months
Cheese, processed	3-4 weeks	6 months
Coffee creamer, liquid refrigerated	3 weeks	Follow instructions on package
Cream, Half & Half	3-4 days	4 months; use for cooking
Cream, heavy	10 days	3-4 months; shake upon thawing to loosen; use for cooking
Cream, light	1 week	3-4 months; use for cooking
Crust, pie or pizza ready to bake	Sell-by date	2 months
Dips, made with sour cream	2 weeks	Do not freeze
Dough, biscuit	Sell-by date	Do not freeze
Dough, bread or pizza	Sell-by date	Do not freeze
Dough, cookie	Sell-by date	2-3 months
Eggs, in shell	4-5 weeks	Do not freeze
Eggs, pasteurized carton egg substitute, unopened	10 days	1 year
Eggs, pasteurized carton real eggs, unopened	10 days	1 year
Juice, purchased refrigerated	3 weeks	8-12 months
Margarine	6 months	12 months
Milk (not shelf-stable)	1 week	1-3 months; use for cooking
Pudding, purchased refrigerated	1-2 days	Do not freeze
Salad dressing, refrigerated packets	3 months	Do not freeze
Sour cream	2-3 weeks	Do not freeze
Whipped cream, aerosol	3-4 weeks	Do not freeze
Whipped topping, aerosol	3 months	Do not freeze
Whipped topping, non-dairy tub	2 weeks	14 months; do not refreeze once thawed
Yogurt	10-14 days	1-2 months

Tips on Storing Frozen Food:

- ✓ If food remains continuously frozen, it will last much longer than if it is exposed to changing temperatures. Keep all frozen food at 0°F or below until distribution.
- ✓ Leave meat, poultry, and seafood in the original packaging when distributing. It is unsafe to open and repack these foods.
- ✓ The “Use-By” date is used for quality assurance, where peak quality begins to lessen but the product may still be consumed. **It's not important if a date expires after freezing because foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely. ***



Items Purchased Frozen	Frozen (0°F or below)
Bread, bagels	3 months
Chicken, nuggets/patties	2 months
Desserts, frozen baked goods	3-4 months
Desserts, frozen cream pies	1-2 months
Desserts, frozen fruit pies	6-8 months
Dinners: pies, casseroles, shrimp, ham, pork, or sausage	3-4 months
Dinners: beef, turkey, chicken, or fish	6 months
Dough, bread	1 month; longer storage inactivates yeast, weakens gluten
Dough, cookie	3 months
Pasteurized eggs in cartons	1 year, purchased frozen, unopened, never thawed
Fish, breaded	4-6 months
Ice pops	6 months
Fruit, frozen	4 months
Ice cream	2-4 months
Juice concentrate	2 years
Soy meat substitutes	12-18 months
Vegetables	8 months
Waffles, pancakes	2 months
Whipped topping, non-dairy tub	6 months

Meats distributed through Virginia Peninsula Foodbank should be completely frozen, and stored at 0°F or lower for as long as possible before distribution. Do not leave meats at room temperature unnecessarily!

Meats, Fresh	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Fish/Seafood, Uncooked		
Fatty fish (salmon, mackerel, perch, bluefish)	2 days	3-6 months
Lean fish (cod, flounder, sole, haddock, pollock)	2 days	12 months
Shrimp, raw	2 days	9 months
Crab, canned	6 months unopened; 5-7 days opened	Do not freeze
Crab, legs	3-5 days	9-12 months
Oysters, shucked	1-2 days	3-4 months
Lobster tails, raw	4-5 days	6-9 months
Scallops, raw	1-2 days	3-6 months
Fish/Seafood, Cooked		
Fatty fish (salmon, mackerel, perch, bluefish)	5-7 days	3-6 months
Lean fish (cod, flounder, sole haddock, pollock)	5-7 days	3-6 months
Shrimp and other shellfish	5-7 days	3-6 months
Meats, Raw		
Beef Roasts	3-5 days	1 year
Beef Steaks	3-5 days	1 year
Pork Roasts	3-5 days	1 year
Pork Chops	3-5 days	1 year
Lamb Roasts	3-5 days	1 year
Lamb Steaks/Chops	3-5 days	1 year
Poultry: chicken or turkey, whole cuts	2 days	1 year
Ground meats (beef, pork, lamb, or poultry)	2 days	9-12 months
Meats, Processed		
Bacon, unopened	2 weeks	6 months
Bacon, opened	1 week	2 months
Chicken, fried	4 days	4 months
Chicken, nuggets/patties	2 days	3 months
Ham, unopened	2 weeks	1 year
Ham, opened	1 week	1-2 months
Hot dogs, unopened	2 weeks	9 months
Luncheon meats, deli sliced or opened	3-5 days	Do not freeze
Luncheon meats, unopened commercial package	2 weeks	1-2 months
Pepperoni, salami	1 month	6 months
Sausage, raw	2 days	6 months
Sausage, smoked links or patties	1 week	9 months

Prepared Foods

Prepared foods should be kept refrigerated until distributed. These foods are perishable, and leaving them at room temperature will shorten their shelf life.



Prepared Items/Deli Foods	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Chicken, roasted or fried	3-4 days	4-6 months
Fruit, cut	Best by date	Do not freeze
Guacamole	5-7 days	6 months
Hummus, pasteurized	3 months	Do not freeze
Hummus, with preservatives	2 months	Do not freeze
Hummus, traditional (no preservatives, not pasteurized)	7 days	Do not freeze
Main dishes, meals	3-4 days	2-3 months
Meats in gravy or broth (including meat pies)	1-2 days	6 months
Pasta, fresh	1 week	1 month
Salads, prepared (macaroni, egg, potato, chicken, tuna, etc.)	3-5 days	Do not freeze
Sauces, egg-based (hollandaise, etc.)	10 days	Do not freeze
Side dishes, cooked vegetables	3-4 days	1-2 months
Side dishes, potato-based (not salad)	3-4 days	1-2 months
Side dishes, rice	3-4 days	1-2 months
Soups, stews	2-3 days	4-6 months
Spinach, salad greens (bagged)	Date on bag	Do not freeze

Tips on Storing Fresh Produce:

- ✓ Most fruits and vegetables have the best quality when kept refrigerated. There are, however, some exceptions
- ✓ Tomatoes taste best if *not* refrigerated. Cold storage can cause them to become mealy.
- ✓ Bananas should not be refrigerated unless fully ripe, and then they should be used within 1-2 days. Refrigeration will cause banana skin to blacken, but the fruit will not ripen while cold.
- ✓ If they are very fresh, apples, mangoes, and stone fruits (plums, peaches, etc.) can be stored at room temperature, but these items should be refrigerated as they ripen.
- ✓ Hardy vegetables like onions, garlic, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and winter squash can be stored in cool, dark places outside of the cooler.



*Source: USDA Food Safety Guidelines